

Kidnapped by Israel

The British Media and The Invasion Of Gaza

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Few readers of a British newspaper would have noticed the story. In the Observer of 25 June, it merited a mere paragraph hidden in the “World in brief” section, revealing that the previous day a team of Israeli commandos had entered the Gaza Strip to “detain” two Palestinians Israel claims are members of Hamas.

The significance of the mission was alluded to in a final phrase describing this as “the first arrest raid in the territory since Israel pulled out of the area a year ago”. More precisely, it was the first time the Israeli army had re-entered the Gaza Strip, directly violating Palestinian control of the territory, since it supposedly left in August last year.

As the Observer landed on doorsteps around the UK, however, another daring mission was being launched in Gaza that would attract far more attention from the British media – and prompt far more concern.

Shortly before dawn, armed Palestinians slipped past Israeli military defences to launch an attack on an army post close by Gaza called Kerem Shalom. They sneaked through a half-mile underground tunnel dug under an Israeli-built electronic fence that surrounds the Strip and threw grenades at a tank, killing two soldiers inside. Seizing another, wounded soldier the gunmen then disappeared back into Gaza.

Whereas the Israeli “arrest raid” had passed with barely a murmur, the Palestinian attack a day later received very different coverage. The BBC’s correspondent in Gaza, Alan Johnstone, started the ball rolling later the same day in broadcasts in which he referred to the Palestinian attack as “a major escalation in cross-border tensions”. (BBC World news, 10am GMT, 25 June 2006)

Johnstone did not explain why the Palestinian attack on an Israeli army post was an escalation, while the Israeli raid into Gaza the previous day was not. Both were similar actions: violations of a neighbour’s territory.

The Palestinians could justify attacking the military post because the Israeli army has been using it and other fortified positions to fire hundreds of shells into Gaza that have contributed to some 30 civilian deaths over the preceding weeks. Israel could justify launching its mission into Gaza because it blames the two men it seized for being behind some of the hundreds of home-made Qassam rockets that have been fired out of Gaza, mostly ineffectually, but occasionally harming Israeli civilians in the border town of Sderot.

So why was the Palestinian attack, and not the earlier Israeli raid, an escalation? The clue came in the same report from Johnstone, in which he warned that Israel would feel

compelled to launch “retaliations” for the attack, implying that a re-invasion of the Gaza Strip was all but inevitable.

So, in fact, the “escalation” and “retaliation” were one and the same thing. Although Johnstone kept repeating that the Palestinian attack had created an escalation, what he actually meant was that Israel was choosing to escalate its response. Both sides could continue their rocket fire, but only Israel was in a position to reinvade with tanks and ground forces.

There was another intriguing aspect to Johnstone’s framework for interpreting these fast-moving events, one that would be adopted by all the British media. He noted that the coming Israeli “retaliation” — the reinvasion — had a specific cause: the escalation prompted by the brief Palestinian attack that left two Israeli soldiers dead and a third captured.

But what about the Palestinian attack: did it not have a cause too? According to the British media, apparently not. Apart from making vague references to the Israeli artillery bombardment of the Gaza Strip over the previous weeks, Johnstone and other reporters offered no context for the Palestinian attack. It had no obvious cause or explanation. It appeared to come out of nowhere, born presumably only of Palestinian malice.

Or as a Guardian editorial phrased it: “Confusion surrounds the precise motives of the gunmen from the Islamist group Hamas and two other armed organisations who captured the Israeli corporal and killed two other soldiers on Sunday. But it was clearly intended to provoke a reaction, as is the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel.” (‘Storm over Gaza,’ 29 June 2006)

It was not as though Johnstone or the Guardian had far to look for reasons for the Palestinian attack, explanations that might frame it as a retaliation no different from the Israeli one. In addition to the shelling that has caused some 30 civilian deaths and inflicted yet more trauma on a generation of Palestinian children, Israel has been blockading Gaza’s borders to prevent food and medicines from reaching the population and it has successfully pressured international donors to cut off desperately needed funds to the Palestinian government. Then, of course, there was also the matter of the Israeli army’s violation of Palestinian-controlled territory in Gaza the day before.

None of this context surfaced to help audiences distinguish cause and effect, and assess for themselves who was doing the escalating and who the retaliating.

That may have been because all of these explanations make sense only in the context of Israel’s continuing occupation of Gaza. But that context conflicts with a guiding assumption in the British media: that the occupation finished with Israel’s disengagement from Gaza in August last year. With the occupation over, all grounds for Palestinian “retaliation” become redundant.

The Guardian’s diplomatic editor, Ewen MacAskill certainly took the view that Israel should be able to expect quiet after its disengagement. “Having pulled out of Gaza last year, the Israelis would have been justified in thinking they might enjoy a bit of peace on their southern border.” (‘An understandable over-reaction,’ Comment is Free, 28 June 2006)

Never mind that Gaza’s borders, airspace, electromagnetic frequencies, electricity and

water are all under continuing Israeli control, or that the Palestinians are not allowed an army, or that Israel is still preventing Gazans from having any contact with Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Meetings of the Palestinian parliament have to be conducted over video links because Israel will not allow MPs in Gaza to travel to Ramallah in the West Bank.

These factors might have helped to explain continuing Palestinian anger, but in British coverage of the conflict they appear to be unmentionables.

Arrested, Detained Or Kidnapped?

There was another notable asymmetry in the media's use of language and their treatment of the weekend of raids by the Palestinians and the Israelis. In the Observer, we learnt that Israel had "detained" the two Palestinians in an "arrest raid". These were presented as the legitimate actions of a state that is enforcing the law within the sphere of its sovereignty (notably, in stark contrast to the other media assumption that the occupation of Gaza is over).

So how did the media describe the Palestinians' seizure of the Israeli soldier the next day? According to Donald MacIntyre of the Independent, Corporal Gilad Shalit was "kidnapped" ('Israel set for military raid over kidnapped soldier, Independent,' 27 June 2006). His colleague Eric Silver considered the soldier "abducted" ('Israel hunts for abducted soldier after dawn raid by militants,' 26 June 2006). Conal Urquhart of the Guardian, referred to him as a "hostage" ('Palestinians hunt for Israeli hostage,' Guardian, 26 June 2006). And BBC online believed him "abducted" and "kidnapped" ('Israel warns of "extreme action",' 28 June 2006)

It was a revealing choice of terminology. Soldiers who are seized by an enemy are usually considered to have been captured; along with being killed, it's an occupational hazard for a soldier. But Britain's liberal media preferred to use words that misleadingly suggested Cpl Shalit was a victim, an innocent whose status as a soldier was not relevant to his fate. The Palestinians, as kidnappers and hostage-takers, were clearly not behaving in a legitimate manner.

That this was a deviation from normal usage, at least when applied to Palestinians, is suggested by the following report from the BBC in 2003, when Israel seized Hamas political leader Sheikh Mohammed Taha: "Israeli troops have captured a founder member of the Islamic militant group Hamas during an incursion into the Gaza Strip." This brief "incursion" included the deaths of eight Palestinians, including a pregnant woman and a child, according to the same report. ('Israel captures Hamas founder,' BBC online, 3 March 2003).

But one does not need to look back three years to spot the double standard being applied by the British media. On the Thursday following Sunday's Palestinian attack on Kerem Shalom, the Israeli army invaded Gaza and the West Bank to grab dozens of Palestinian leaders, including cabinet ministers. Were they being kidnapped or taken hostage by the Israeli army?

This is what a breaking news report from the Guardian had to say: "Israeli troops today arrested dozens of Hamas ministers and MPs as they stepped up attempts to free a soldier kidnapped by militants in Gaza at the weekend. The Israeli army said 64 Hamas officials, including seven ministers and 20 other MPs, had been detained in a series of early morning

arrests.” (David Fickling and agencies, ‘Israel detains Hamas ministers,’ 29 June 2006).

BBC World took the same view. In its late morning report, Lyse Doucet told viewers that in response to the attack in which an Israeli soldier had been “kidnapped”, the Israeli army “have been detaining Palestinian cabinet ministers”. In the same broadcast, another reporter, Wyre Davies, referred to “Thirty Hamas politicians, including eight ministers, detained in the West Bank”, calling this an attempt by Israel at “keeping up the pressure”. (BBC World news, 10am GMT, 29 June 2006)

“Arrested” and “detained”? What exactly was the crime committed by these Palestinian politicians from the West Bank? Were they somehow accomplices to Cpl Shalit’s “kidnap” by Palestinian militants in the separate territory of Gaza? And if so, was Israel intending to prove it in a court of law? In any case, what was the jurisdiction of the Israeli army in “arresting” Palestinians in Palestinian-controlled territory?

None of those questions needed addressing because in truth none of the media had any doubts about the answer. It was clear to all the reporters that the purpose of seizing the Palestinian politicians was to hold them as bargaining chips for the return for Cpl Shalit.

In the Guardian, Conal Urquhart wrote: “Israeli forces today arrested more than 60 Hamas politicians in the West Bank and bombed targets in the Gaza Strip. The moves were designed to increase pressure on Palestinian militants to release an Israeli soldier held captive since Sunday.” (‘Israel rounds up Hamas politicians,’ 3.45pm update, 29 June 2006)

The BBC’s Lyse Doucet in Jerusalem referred to the “arrests” as “keeping up the pressure on the Palestinians on all fronts”, and Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen argued that the detention of the Hamas MPs and ministers “sends out a very strong message about who’s boss around here. The message is: If Israel wants you, it can get you.” (BBC World News, 6pm GMT, 29 June 2006)

Siding With The Strong

So why have the British media adopted such differing terminology for the two sides, language in which the Palestinians are consistently portrayed as criminals while the Israelis are seen as law-enforcers?

Interestingly, the language used by the British media mirrors that used by the Israeli media. The words “retaliation”, “escalation”, “pressure”, “kidnap” and “hostage” are all drawn from the lexicon of the Israeli press when talking about the Palestinians. The only Israeli term avoided in British coverage is the label “terrorists” for the Palestinian militants who attacked the army post near Gaza on 25 June.

In other words, the British media have adopted the same terminology as Israeli media organisations, even though the latter proudly declare their role as cheerleading for their army against the Palestinian enemy.

The replication by British reporters of Israeli language in covering the conflict is mostly unconscious. It happens because of several factors in the way foreign correspondents operate in conflict zones, factors that almost always favour the stronger side over the weaker, independently of (and often in opposition to) other important contexts, such as international law and common sense.

The causes of this bias can be divided into four pressures on foreign correspondents: identification with, and assimilation into, the stronger side's culture; over-reliance on the stronger side's sources of information; peer pressure and competition; and, most importantly, the pressure to satisfy the expectations of editors back home in the media organisation.

The first pressure derives from the fact that British correspondents, as well as the news agencies they frequently rely on, are almost exclusively based in Israeli locations, such as West Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, where they share the daily rituals of the host population. Correspondents have Israeli neighbours, not Palestinian ones; they drink and eat in Israeli, not Palestinian, bars and restaurants; they watch Israeli, not Palestinian, TV; and they fear Palestinian suicide attacks, not Israeli army "incursions".

Another aspect of this assimilation – this one unmentionable in newsrooms – is the long-standing tendency, though admittedly one now finally waning, by British media organisations to prefer Jewish reporters for the "Jerusalem beat". The media justify this to themselves on several grounds: often a senior Jewish reporter on the staff wants to be based in Jerusalem, in some cases as a prelude to receiving Israeli citizenship; he or she may already speak some Hebrew; and, as a Jew living in a self-declared Jewish state, he or she is likely to find it easier to gain access to officials.

The obvious danger that Jewish reporters who already feel an affinity with Israel before their posting may quickly start to identify with Israel and its goals is not considered an acceptable line of inquiry. Anyone raising it is certain to be dismissed as an anti-Semite.

The second pressure involves the wide range of sources of information foreign correspondents come to rely on in their daily reporting, from the Israeli media to the Israeli army and government press offices. Most of the big Israeli newspapers now have daily editions in English that arrive at reporters' doors before breakfast and update all day on the internet. The Palestinians do not have the resources to produce competing information. Israeli officials, again unlike their Palestinian counterparts, are usually fluent in English and ready with a statement on any subject.

This asymmetry between Israeli and Palestinian sources of information is compounded by the fact that foreign correspondents usually consider Israeli spokespeople to be more "useful". It is, after all, Israeli decision-makers who are shaping and determining the course of events. The army's spokesperson can speak with authority about the timing of the next Gaza invasion, and the government press office knows by heart the themes of the prime minister's latest unilateral plans.

Palestinian spokespeople, by contrast, are far less effective: they usually know nothing more about Israeli decisions than what they have read in the Israeli papers; they are rarely at the scene of Israeli military "retaliations", and are often unreliable in the ensuing confusion; and internal political disputes, and a lack of clear hierarchies, often leave spokespeople unsure of what the official Palestinian line is.

Given these differences, the Israeli "version" is usually the first one to hit the headlines, both in the Israeli media and on the international TV channels. Which brings us to the third pressure.

News is not an independent category of information journalists search for; it is the

information that journalists collectively decide is worth seeking out. So correspondents look to each other to determine what is the “big story”. This is why reporters tend to hunt in packs.

The problem for British journalists is that they are playing second fiddle to the largest contingent of English-language correspondents: those from America. What makes the headlines in the US papers is the main story, and as a result British journalists tend to follow the same leads, trying to beat the American majors to the best lines of inquiry.

The effect is not hard to predict: British coverage largely mirrors American coverage. And given the close identification of US politicians, business and media with Israel, American coverage is skewed very keenly towards a pro-Israel agenda. That has direct repercussions for British reporting. (It does, however, allow for occasional innovation in the British media too: for example, whereas American reporters were concerned to promote the largely discredited account by the Israeli army of how seven members of a Palestinian family were killed during artillery bombardment of a beach in Gaza on 9 June, their British colleagues had a freer hand to investigate the same events.)

Closely related to this sympathy of coverage between the British and American media is the fourth pressure. No reporter who cares about his or her career is entirely immune from the cumulative pressure of expectations from the news desk in London. The editors back home read the American dailies closely; they imbibe as authoritative the views of the major American columnists, like Thomas Friedman, who promote Israel’s and Washington’s agenda while sitting thousands of miles away from the events they analyse; and they watch the wire services, which are equally slanted towards the American and Israeli interpretation of events.

The reporter who rings the news desk each day to offer the best “pitch” quickly learns which angles and subjects “fly” and which don’t. “Professional” journalists of the type that get high-profile jobs, like Jerusalem correspondent, have learnt long ago the predilections of the desk editors. If our correspondent really believes in a story, he or she will fight the desk vigorously to have it included. But there are only so many battles correspondents who value their jobs are prepared to engage in.

Collective Punishment

Within this model for understanding the work of British correspondents, we can explain the confused sense of events that informs the recent reporting of the Independent’s Donald MacIntyre.

He points out an obvious fact that seems to have eluded many of his colleagues: Israel’s reinvasion of Gaza, its bombing of the only electricity station, and disruption to the water supply, its bombing of the main bridges linking north and south Gaza, and its terrifying sonic bombs over Gaza City are all forms of collective punishment of the civilian Palestinian population that are illegal under international law.

Derar Abu Sisi, who runs the power station in Gaza, tells MacIntyre it will take a “minimum of three to six months” to restore electricity supplies. (‘Israeli missiles pound Gaza into a new Dark Age in “collective punishment”, 29 June 2006). The same piece includes a warning that the petrol needed to run generators will soon run out, shutting off the power to hospitals and other vital services.

This is more than the Guardian's coverage managed on the same day. Conal Urquhart writes simply: "Israel reoccupied areas of southern Gaza yesterday and bombed bridges and an electricity plant to force Palestinian militants to free the abducted soldier." Blithely, Urquhart continues: "In Gaza there was an uneasy calm as Israeli aircraft and forces operated without harming anyone. Missiles were fired at buildings, roads and open fields, but ground forces made no attempt to enter built-up areas." ('Israel rounds up Hamas politicians,' 11.45am, 29 June 2006)

In MacIntyre's article, despite his acknowledgment of Israel's "collective punishment" of Gaza (note even this statement of the obvious needs quotation marks in the Independent's piece to remove any suggestion that it can be attributed directly to the paper), he also refers to a Hamas call for a prisoner swap to end the stand-off as an "escalation" of the "crisis", and he describes the seizure of a Hamas politician by Israel as an "arrest" and a "retaliation".

In a similarly indulgent tone, the Guardian's Ewen MacAskill calls Israel's re-invasion of Gaza "an understandable over-reaction": "Israel has good cause for taking tough action against the Palestinians in Gaza" – presumably because of their "escalation" by firing Qassam rockets. MacAskill does, however, pause to criticise the invasion, pointing out that "Israel has to allow the Palestinians a degree of sovereignty." ('An understandable over-reaction,' Comment is Free, www.guardian.co.uk, 28 June 2006)

Not full sovereignty, note, just a degree of it. In MacAskill's view, invasions are out, but by implication "targeted assassinations", air strikes and artillery fire, all of which have claimed dozens of Palestinian civilian lives over the past weeks, are allowed as they only partially violate Palestinian sovereignty.

But MacAskill finds a small sliver of hope for the future from what has come to be known as the "Prisoners' Document", an agreement between the various Palestinian factions that implicitly limits Palestinian territorial ambitions to the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. "The ambiguous document agreed between Hamas and Fatah yesterday does not recognize Israel's right to exist but it is a step in the right direction," writes MacAskill. (ibid)

A step in which direction? Answer: Israel's direction. Israel has been demanding three concessions from the Palestinians before it says it will negotiate with them: a recognition of Israel's right to exist; a renunciation of violence; and a decision to abide by previous agreements.

A Guardian editorial shares MacAskill's assessment: "Implicit recognition [of Israel] coupled with an end to violence [by the Palestinians] would be a solid basis on which to proceed." ('Storm over Gaza,' 29 June 2006)

If the Palestinians are being faulted for their half-hearted commitment to these three yardsticks by which progress can be judged, how does Israel's own commitment compare?

First, whereas the long-dominant Palestinian faction Fatah recognised Israel nearly 20 years ago, and Hamas appears ready to agree a similar recognition, Israel has made no comparable concession. It has never recognised the Palestinians right to exist as a people or as a state, from Golda Meir's infamous dictum to Ehud Olmert's plans for stealing yet more Palestinian land in the West Bank to create a series of Palestinian ghettos there.

Second, whereas the Palestinians have a right under international law to use violence to liberate themselves from Israel's continuing occupation, the various factions are now agreeing in the Prisoners' Document to limit that right to actions within the occupied territories. Israel, meanwhile, is employing violence on a daily basis against the general population of Gaza, harming civilians and militants alike, even though under international law it has a responsibility to look after the occupied population no different from its duties towards its own citizens.

Third, whereas the Palestinians have been keen since the signing of the Oslo accords to have their agreements with Israel honoured — most assume that they are their only hope of winning statehood — Israel has flagrantly and consistently ignored its commitments. During Oslo it missed all its deadlines for withdrawing from Palestinian territory, and during the Oslo and current Road Map peace negotiations it has continued to build and extend its illegal settlements on Palestinian land.

In other words, Israel has not recognised the Palestinians, it has refused to renounce its illegitimate use of violence against the population it occupies, and it has abrogated its recent international agreements.

Doubtless, however, we will have to wait some time for a Guardian editorial prepared to demand of Israel an "implicit recognition [of the Palestinians] coupled with an end to violence as a solid basis on which to proceed."

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